

Learning to Love... Book 1: Shade |

Mates

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SHADE

We walked in silence for a few minutes before Caelan finally spoke.

“So, I talked about myself the whole drive up here. Tell me something about you,” he said.

“I don’t think there’s much to tell.” I shrugged. “I’m not very interesting. I don’t have any stories like you do. I train and I protect Sunny. That’s about it.”

I slumped slightly hearing myself say it aloud. My whole life was following Sunny around and putting myself at risk to keep her safe. Other than training and fighting, I didn’t do anything else. I didn’t even know what I enjoyed anymore.

“I don’t think that’s true,” he contested. “I bet you’re a very interesting person. You just haven’t had the luxury of ever getting to think about what you want. How about I ask you some questions, and you can answer them?”

I smiled. It was weird that someone wanted to get to know me. I was so used to no one really caring or even knowing that I existed.

“All right.”

“Okay,” he said eagerly. “We’ll start with something easy. What’s your favorite color?”

I stared down at the trail. *What is my favorite color? When was the last time I had thought about that?*

“I guess,” I said after a moment. “I’ve always liked purple.”

“Favorite movie?”

“Oh...uh...I don’t have one.” I shrugged. “I don’t get to watch a lot of TV.”

My training master had called entertainment a distraction, and my father had been all too happy to enforce that rule, afraid that I might get dangerous ideas by watching.

The only time I'd ever gotten close to seeing anything was when I accompanied Sunny to the movies with her friends, and even then I had to stand at the back, facing the door in case of an attack.

"Oh, okay. Uh, favorite music? Or a band that you really like?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I don't really have one of those either."

This can't be going well. Caelan probably thinks I'm the most boring person he's ever met. All I've contributed to this conversation was my favorite color, and even then, I wasn't even sure about my answer.

"Come on. Everyone likes music," he remarked. "You can tell me. I like all kinds of genres."

"I'm not really allowed to listen to music," I admitted. "My training master said it was a distraction, and I just never questioned it."

"You're not allowed?" he hissed, his body tensing as he clenched his jaw.
"Okay, we're going to have to do something about that."

We were getting nowhere with these sorts of questions, and I felt guilty for being such a dud. I didn't want him to be disappointed with our date.

"I hear it sometimes when Sunny plays it in her room or the car," I offered, trying to give him something to work with. "I don't know any of the lyrics or the names of the bands she likes, but I've heard a little."

"Well, that's good. Do you like it?" he tried, doing his best to make a conversation out of nothing.

"Yes. I like how it makes me feel, I guess," I admitted quietly. "She likes bright, happy sounding songs."

"That gives us a place to start," he replied. "Personally, I'm a big fan of classic rock. I'll introduce you to some of the greats when we get back. Maybe you'll find something in there you like too."

"That would be nice," I agreed.

We got quiet again, just walking through the woods. I knew it was my fault. I was giving him nothing to work with.

I cleared my throat, glancing at him. "I like to read when I get the chance."

"Really?" he replied. "What kind of books do you like to read?"

"Usually, it's a lot about war and battle tactics to keep me sharp, but...uh, but my favorite books to read are...uh, romances," I admitted with a blush.

There were a couple of romance novels stashed under my pallet back at Thunder Moon. Sunny had told me to donate them to the library when she'd finished them, but I'd kept them, reading them in secret whenever I got the chance.

"There's nothing wrong with a little romance," he remarked with a smile.

"There it is," he exclaimed as he hurried forward.

I gasped at the sight before me. A tall tower made of large natural stones, meticulously stacked together, stood before us, rising high above the treetops like it could touch the sky.

"Wow!" I breathed.

"The watchtower has been around since Harvest Moon was first established. We're actually near the pack's original borders, but obviously, we've grown a lot since then. From the top, you can see our territory stretching out in all directions. It's breathtaking," he explained.

He took my hand, leading me toward the arched doorway.

"Are we actually going to go inside?" I asked as I stared at the multicolored stonework. "Am I even allowed?"

"Of course," he chuckled. "We didn't come all this way just to look at it from here. I wanted you to get a bird's-eye view of the grounds since you missed out on the pack tour."

My cheeks heated. *That is really thoughtful. I can't believe he did this just for me.*

“The entire building is made of stone pulled from the pack lands. It doesn’t serve much of a defensive purpose any longer, but we’ve maintained it because it’s part of our history and the view from the top is unmatched.”

He kept a hold of my hand as he led me up the winding staircase, our fingers intertwined. I didn’t mind. I was growing more and more comfortable with his touch. I actually felt safe to be myself around him.

I gasped when we finally stepped out onto the viewing platform. It wrapped around the tower, offering a spectacular view from any angle.

It was stunning. I stared across the land over the treetops. I could see for miles in every direction.

I can only imagine what the view must be like in the autumn when all the trees change their leaves. I bet it’s spectacular.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“It’s beautiful,” I admitted softly, my tone full of reverence.

“Good,” he sighed happily as though my response had lifted a weight from his shoulders. “I’m really glad you like it.”

“You have a very beautiful territory, Alpha... I mean, Caelan.”

He shifted on his feet. “It could be your territory too, if you wanted it to be,” he commented quietly, almost as though he wasn’t certain whether or not he wanted me to hear him.

I forgot myself and faced him, my eyes locking with his for the first time. They were a kaleidoscope of colors. Greens, tans, browns, blues, and grays all blended together beautifully within his beckoning gaze.

I inhaled sharply as a sudden and intense feeling rushed through me. My heart pounded in my chest, and I forgot how to breathe for a moment as something inside me ignited. It felt as though an invisible tether had snapped into place, tying my soul to his.

The word *mine* rang through my mind, intensifying the longer we stared at one another. I couldn’t bring myself to turn away even though I knew I should.

What does this mean? This feeling? What was it Taffy said? The mate bond cements into place the first time you look directly into each other's eyes. Does that mean... But it can't be. It's not possible, right?

"We're m-mates," I stammered.

"Yes," he sighed happily. "We are."

The sudden revelation that the alpha was my fated mate came crashing down on me.

Oh Goddess! He's supposed to be with Sunny! That's what's supposed to happen here! He's supposed to choose her, not me. Crap, what does this mean for Thunder Moon? What about Sunny and Father? They are going to be furious.

"This is very bad," I continued, putting a hand to my head.

"Why is this bad?" he demanded, his energy shifting from relieved to upset.

"I'm an omega, Caelan. Literally the lowest-ranked wolf in the pack," I whispered. "And I'm cursed. We can't be mates. I can't be the luna you deserve." I sighed. "It wasn't supposed to happen this way. You were supposed to fall for Sunny so we could save Thunder Moon."

He squeezed my hand, making me look at him again. "Shade, the Goddess works in mysterious ways, and you are my fated mate, the one she's picked for me above all others. I wouldn't choose anyone else for anything in the whole world," he replied.

His words sounded like something straight out of one of my romance novels. Something too good to possibly be true, no matter how much I secretly wanted it to be.

"I can't give you what you need, Caelan. An alpha is supposed to continue his lineage, and cursed wolves can't have pups. Besides, look at you," I said, willing him to understand. "Why would someone like you want to mate with someone as plain as me?"

"You're the most beautiful wolf I've ever seen, Shade. And we can figure out the rest together. Just please," he pleaded, pulling me closer. "Please give us

a chance. I know it's scary, but I promise to make you the happiest wolf on Earth if you'll let me. Be my mate, Shade."

I frowned. *Is he begging? An alpha should never have to beg an omega for anything. I need him to stop. I need him to behave as an alpha should so I can think clearly. So, I can figure out what my next move should be, what I need to do for my pack.*

I paused, my stomach sinking at the thought of this dream ending. Was that what I wanted? Did it matter? I owed Sunny and the pack everything. I couldn't be the reason why she failed.

I did the only thing that I could think of and nodded, not sure I could trust myself to speak.

"Thank you, Shade!" he sighed. "I promise you won't regret it."

Without warning, he reached up and grasped my face, placing a light kiss on my forehead.

My instincts kicked into gear, my training demanding that I defend myself, but I fought the urge to push him away. I tensed, taking a deep breath as I tried to calm down.

It's just Caelan. He's not trying to hurt me. He's my mate.

He jumped back almost as quickly as he'd grabbed me, dropping his hands to his sides.

"Damn. I'm sorry, Shade," he apologized. "I got excited. I've been so worried about what you might say that I just couldn't control myself when you said yes. I know you're not used to physical contact like that. I'll try to be more aware about that kind of thing moving forward."

I was too shocked to respond, standing there stiffly as he shuffled on his feet. A few moments of silence stretched between us before I was finally able to speak again.

"Uh, thank you. This is...a lot to process," I admitted. "I might need some time to get used to...all of this."

“Take all the time you need,” he offered with a smile, intertwining his fingers with mine again. “I’m not going anywhere.”

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